The Master Key

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By JOHN FLEMING WILSON

CHAPTER XXIX.

Ruth to the Rescue. Sir Donald Faversham gently lusisted that Ruth Gallon attend a ball which was to be

given by the British others. Ruth pleaded to be allowed not to go, but Consul Reynolds and his wife added that. Where is he?" their orgings to the baroner's, and even the time honored excuse of "nothing at her and remembered the strangeto wear" was firmly refused.

Though she said to thing to any one else about her , celings, she really could not refrain from accusing berself of disloyalty to John Dorr.

He was out in the hills risking his hfe to regain her fortune. Could she dance and take pleasure with a cheerful heart when she did not know. whether he was living or dead?

However, she went and received the formal congratulations of a great many natty officers and the informal complaints of certain young Americans, who vowed that she was unpatriotic in choosing as English husband, and danced with Sir Donald and his friends and smiled and blushed at the compilments and frowned mughingly on the firts and generally conducted herself as a happy bride to be should.

Faversham was delighted and told her so in many ways. And long after midnight, when Mrs. Reynolds was preparing to go home, he took Ruth out demped some powder on it and ran under the shadows of the garden trees and would have kissed her. "Don't?" she an' simply.

"What is the matter, darling?" be asked tenderly.

She stared out into the darkness, and he saw the pallor of her face. am sure something has happened

to John." Faversham frowned. It was too bad that this man should always come between him and his betrothed. But his

voice was very gentle as he answered: "That is out of the question. Ach met is very faithful, and if anything had happened I should know of it."

Ruth shock ber head and insisted that she was sure. The baronet laughed at her, but she was not to be put

"I know John is in trouble," she said determinedly. "If you won't beip me I'm go myself!"

Sir Donald argued as strongly as he could and in vain. "I'm perfectly sure that John Dorr

is in trouble," she repeated. "He's all alone up there among those awful natives and"-"Achmet is with him." interposed

Faversham. -"and some one must go right away

and belp blm. Ruth went on. "You poor giri!" marmured Mrs. Reynolds. "I know now you feel, but you must get some rest. We'll talk it

over later in the morning " She drew Noth away toward per room, with a backward ginnee of

whimsical comfort for the baronet. Faversham watched them go, stood doubtful for a moment, shook his head

and departed. The consul's wife found Ruth too stubborn to handle by herself, for she

insisted that, as no one else would go, she would set out nerself, and to emphasize her assertion began to change from her ball gown into a riding babit. The consul came out in dressing

gown and slippers when Ruth, fully clad, emerged from her room, still resisting the importunity of his wife. He added many common sense argu-

ments, but Huth would not listen. "I know that he is in trouble," she repented.

"But if he were, which is most unlikely, you couldn't belp him," Mr. Reynolds said buntly. "In fact, you merely make marters werse."

When they found her obdurate they took silent compset of one another, told her to wait a moment and vanished.

The instant they were gone Ruth slipped out of the house and boldly turned her face toward the bills now black against the unit sky.

All day she traveled, strangely alone in a populous country. Many natives she met, but they merely looked cu-



riously at the white girl in western riding clothes, and as she avoided villages she escaped the notice of any one in authority.

She knew that when her absence was certain both Mr. Reynolds and Sir Don-

ald would come after her. . Night came, and she was still push

ing on, though hungry and weary. In the darkness she perforce kept to open nonor of their engagement | paths, and it was on one of these that

a panting native found ner. "Arhmet;" she whispered when he raised his contorted face to hers. In a few words he told her what had

happened. She said curtly. "I know Sir Donnid's former servant looked

ness of things done by white women He led the way back toward the but.

muttering now and again of the terrible things he had seen.

And while Ruth was thus defying all precedent and going to the aid of the you." man she loved Wilkerson had found himself again bemused in cut off in the darkness from escape to the city.

Though he and Dorr had driven the hillmen away from the but and quenched their expercess of assault, they still novered in the little gullies, and on ev. ery hand the fugitive found himself confronted by a heard but unseen en-

He stote back to the but and peered in. John was still bound in the chair, and Drake's body lay buddled on the

He made his preparations quickly, pliing some dried grass and fine rubbish against one corner of the hut.

When the pile was once alight be



"Achmet!" shy whispered.

swiftly away, biding a few hundred yards back.

The but took fire slowly, but the glare accomplished his purpose. It slowly drew the watchers toward it. Satisfied that no one would be spying on him now, but that all would have eyes only for the fire, he set forth quickly, careless of the fact that John Dorr must be burning alive.

In the darkness be passed Achmet and Ruth

The blaze had almost entirely enreloped the but when Ruth finally staggered in and with a sob of joy cut John's bonds and balf dragged him through the swirling smoke into the

When she had done this she promptty fainted.

The smoldering embers were sending up blue spirals of smoke into the morning sky when Consul Reynords and Sir Donald spurred their wearled borses up to where John and Achinet squatted with Ruth between them. still but dimy conscious.

Dorr briedy explained his experiences and related how Ruth had suddenly appeared, just as he had given up hope.

Sir Donald, kneeling by Ruth's side. merely putted her hand.

The next morning Mrs. Reynolds laid down the law in set terms to the party assembled around the breakfast table. "You must get this young lady back to America," she said, "papers or no

Dapers!" John and Sir Donald nodded without

glancing at each other. Thus it was that a couple of days later old Tom Kane at the "Master Key" mine received a cablegram read-

cific; Frisco, Sith, with papers. We follow next steamer.

Thus it was that the struggle between Wilkerson and John Dorr was again transformed to the valley in which lay the "Master Key" mine.

Wilkerson and Jean Darnell, with the precious papers in their possession. alipped away hurriedly, taking the first steamer that sailed.

He had told her about Drake's death. though unable to say how it had happened. Privately be had no regrets. The young man had served his purpose, and it was by no means doubtful that Mrs. Darnell would have seen to it that he had his reward, for she Atted him as much as it was in her nature to care for any man, he thought. "He was an awfully good sort," she said to Witherson one night as they caned over the rall and watched the long swells from the bow speed fanwise into the infinity of the sea. "Yes, the fellow had his good points,"

be admirted. "I miss nim," she said simply. Later she added thoughtfully, "I think he

was to love with me. Witkerson taughed. Mrs. Darnett gianced at him with an expression strange on her handsome

face. "Yes, I am sure he toved me." "In vatu." he returned nightly. "I don't know whether it might have been wholly in vain after all," she

murmured. "Life has given me sittle ve of that kind. It seems as if i had always been c woman who for mere seit protection count not let any one love me or let myself love him."

"I should not have let you love him." was the quiet response. "I have struggled too hard and fought too long for you to allow any one else to have "And what does your love amount

to, after all, Harry?" she asked. "Tell me plainty. Has it done either of us any good? Will it ever do us any Wilkerson stared out at the dark sea.

and his face grew slowly very cruel. "Good?" be repeated. "All that I know is that I love you more than anything else in the universe. You love luxury and jewelry and gold and silk. Because I know what you love I am trying to get it for you, because I want you more than I want anything else. 1-1 think we are even."

"Even?" she said in a suddenly strained voice. "Yes, we are evenreceiver of stolen goods, stolen happiness, stolen life, stolen gold."

When they Cially reached San Francisco Wilkerson found her oddly disco to the mine or to return to New York.

One moment she was in a tigerfela rage; the next hour the was staring at the fog haunted bills with eyes that saw nothing. He stormed and argued to no pur-

He recalled to her constantly the fact that he had the deeds, the master key itself, the plans of the toention of the mother lode. She either listened listlessly or drove

him away with furious upbraidings. Yet in the end she accompanied him to Silent Valley. It was a bitter moment for old Tom

Kane when the stage drove up and Wilkerson and Mrs. Darnell got out instend of John Dorr and Roth. He had hoped against hope, and now

his dreams were in ashes, for Wilkerson instantly took charge, the men, as Tom put it to himself, followed the paymaster, and so far as outward appearance went the "Master Key" mine was firmly in Wilkerson's possession. Mrs, Durnell here proved herself the

shrewder mind. Though she was little seen, her influence was potent-And more than anything else she worked on Wilkerson so that he did not use the plans and open up the

"Walt," she told him. "Don't be impatient. Our whole power here is in the fact that we have the secret. Once that is public we'll likely lose every-

thing. "Rut we ought to be at work before

Dorr gets back," be would argue. "Yes, and every court in the land will help him to regain this mine and its wealth. Don't you see? Compromisel

"Compromise!" be repeated dully. "Yes, you foot?"

"But how?" "Wnit-wait till John and Ruth get back. They'll be gird enough to buy those plans, Harry."

When John Dorr and Ruth arrived on the following steamer Everett met chem at the pier and told them the news as he had gathered it from faith ful Tom Kane, whom Jean Darnell had insisted should resume his duties as cook, sagely observing to Wilkerson that it would be well for them to have a witness whose veracity Dorr would

Settled in the hotel, Dorr briefly recited the experiences of the past months and then bluntly asked, "What

Exercit was ready with his answer. The dull red flooded John's face, and

he bit his lip. Had all his work gone for nothing? Everett hald a friendly hand on his knee. "Now listen," he said gravely. "Here is Miss Ruth minus her key, practically ousted from possession of

her property and if we are not mistaken, unable to iny her hands on her most precious inheritance-the plans of the mother lode. They're in Wilkerson's possession."

"And he's digging the gold night and

day!" John burst out. With a swift giance to reassure Ruth, who sat in mournful stience, Everett

"That is the shrewd part of Wilkerson's play. He knows that the law will give Miss Ruth here back her mine and all that it contains. It would take time, but as sure as we are sitting here, and no one knows it better than he-justice would strip blus of every Ill gotten cent and send him to prison with his accomplice. So what does he do? Hastily uncover the real prize? No. He concests it still and

merely works the original mine." But we can put him out of father's

mine, can't we?" demanded Ruth. "And when we do we shall still be no wiser as to the location of the real gold. All our trouble and expense will have gone for naught. Wilkerson will still hold the secret of the 'Master "And how are we going to get h

from him?" demanded Dorr, ellaching Everett smiled. "By bilying it from

"He will ask millions!"

The broker smiled again. "Consider Wilkerson's position for a moment. He is liable to arrest, trial and long imprisonment on a dezen charges. Within twenty four bours we can have him behind the bars. But we wouldn't be belping ourselves much would we? Yet Wilkerson and Mrs Darnell don't want to go to fall. We bold that club over them.

"They have the secret we must have and we can ruin their lives. Therefore we make a trade. We give them as surance that we will not prosecute them, that we will even earlieb them If need be, and they in return for this hand us over the plans that Thomas Gailon made.

CHAPTER XXX.

"I-I thought you loved me too!" Til had listened intently, and now she seemed to draw her self a little out of the conversation. Her change of attitude did not go unobserved, and buth Everett and Dorr were puzzled.

Evere't saw that there was another mystery of which he knew nothing and instantly and in the most businesslike manner turned to Ruth and said:

Now, all this subject to your approval, Miss Ruth. You know you are practically of age." She looked at Everett steadily and

said in a low tone. "I think Sir Donald Faversham should be consulted." "But be has nothing" - John began.

'He has everything to do with this plan," Ruth said steadily,

"I know he's done a " Dorr stam mered, feeling the ground give under bis feet, "but in this matter"-"I think Miss Ruth is perfectly

tight," Everett said quickly, trying not to let the pity be felt for John show in trait. She did not know whether to his eyes. "Let us call him, by all menns. Sir Donald had kept himself most

discreetly in the background for many weeks. Only the constant oversight for her comfort showed Rute that she was bever out of his mind. She could not even think of

without a throb of gratitude. And now when all must be made plain and she must live up to her own promise she streled herself for the or-

Sir Donald listened to Everett's plan and approved it thoroughly.

"And now that we have decided what to do." he concluded, "I think we should immediately go to the mine and make the ali-the deat. I by no means like this affair, and the sooner it is over with the better."

"Good," said Everett, much refleved. "And you and I. Sir Donald, being the third parties, had better hundle this Do you saree to that, John?"

"I'd like to just get my hands on that fellow once more," was the boarse response. "There would be no further need of this 'detil' as you call it."

"Yes and the fat would be in the Bre." Everett replied. Dorr fittally agreed to maintain a strict neutrality and fluth gratefully it in his pocket. accepted the offer to conduct her af-

alrs as Sir Donald and Evereit should That night they left for Silent Val-

Tom dane received them joyfully flung the key on the table. find especially seen to if that the bun galow was roady for her

He was 'ull of other news, but both door. Sir Donard and Everett put him off and set about their business.

that night in the office. On one side were Harry Wilkerson and Mrs. Dar neil, on the other Everett and Faversham, the latter looking so intensely bored that shrewd Mrs. Darnell instantly made up her mind that she and Wilkerson would have to accept bitter | about to spring.

terms. Sir Donaid was only too evidently waiting for formalities to be over be- her companion. He met her flery gaze fore he said the few words necessary coldly for him to say as Ruth's representa-

Wilkerson himself felt, too, that he was at last playing a game where all



"Yes, and the fat would be in the fire."

the cards were to be face up on the

When Everett had coldly and definitely set the situation before them Wilkerson sat motionless and in at lence for a moment. His shifty eyes did not meet the gaze

of the three who looked to him for his yes or no. When he spoke it was with a dash of his old effrontery. "I understand the proposat," he said. new relation to Ruth into his narrative working his tean, brown fingers back

and forth over a time print on the desk. "We quit give you the plans and you give us"-he suddenly leaned over and darted a bright giance into

Everett's eves-"you cive us what?" Everett was prepared for the ques tion and suswered it promptly. "We'll give you \$50,000 cash and won't prose-

Wilkerson shook his bend. "You understand that half this mine was nine by rights when Tom tinion took it for himself by shooting me and

leaving me to die on the desert. Fifty thousand? I'nh!" "And immunity from prosecution." stated Sir Donald impassively. Wilkerson sweng on him, thrustleg.

his lean, furious face close to the Eng sishman's caim, unperturbed counte "What have you to do with this?" he

smarted. Favorsham did not shift his position sor change his tone. "I have Miss Sallon's promise to plarry me."

There was a sudden silence, broken snly when Wilkersea's dry throat uttered a triumphant crosk, Mrs. Durnell looked at Paversham

with her tawny eyes filled with duli smbers of passion. Everett sat as if stunned. "So John Dorr wets the kicks and

you get the halfpence!" said Wilkerson wildly. "I have cursed him, but all my curses couldn't have punished him worse. Why, he went on half hysterically, "the poor fool loves her!" Again silence

This time Everett broke it, saying stilly; "You understand our proposi-

tion. Do you accept it?" Mrs. Darnell laid her hand on Wilkerson's arm, and he seemed to fall into

a profound reverte. They could see the lights and shadows flit over his saturaine visage, the sparkle of his eyes dying into a mere dreamy glow, the suiden tightening of his thin lips, the working of his

Finally he roused himself as by an effort.

"I think I ought to have more," he said quietly. "There are signs of gold on one part of this property which has never been worked. It is nowhere near the piece narked in the pinns, as you will easily see. You understand that Tom Gallon and I were partners when he located that rich ore. Never mind. Bygones are bygones. But I want \$50,000 and that little claim. It may not amount to anything, but then again it may. Fifty thousand is soon spent. A mine is a mine,"

"The plans!" demanded Sir Donald. Wilkerson pulled out of his shirt bosom an oliskin folded around a square paper. He laid this on the ta

"There they are," he said, as though

driven to buy. Mrs. Darnell's movement of protest did not escape either Everett or Faver-

sham. They looked at the little packet that had cost so much agony and bloodshed "It is a-a gentleman's agreement." said Sir Donald presently, taking out

his check book. The money passed, and then Everett picked up the oilskin packet and put

"The deeds and the master key," he said gently. Mrs. Darnell's face became splendid | toward Mrs. Darnell, who stood near in its futile rage. She tore the ribbon from about her throbbing throat and the evening sun.

and informed fluth that Mrs. Darnell Sir Donald picked it up carefully and rose. At the same moment Everett At that signal there was a general pocketed the deeds and started for the rush for cover.

He and Faversham passed out into the starry night and vanished, seaving at his feet, and waved his hand to the It was a strange conference that met Wilkerson still at the desk fumbling the check.

Suddenly be reached for pen and ink and scrawled his name on the back. Then he silently handed it to Jean Darnell, biting her red lips and moving almost imperceptibly, like an animal

She took the bit of paper and tucked the bill eddled and swirled. it in her bosom. Then she turned on

"The mother lode is on that little bit I got them to give us," be said caimly. "The plans Everett has are false." And the look that she allowed him

to see in her eyes was such as no other man had ever seen there. It was as if her tortured and lonely, proud soul had found its mate in some darkness made jurid by the dames of hell. Sir Donald spoke a brief good night

the light burned in John Dorr's cabin and tell him of the events of the even-He met Ruth at the door and quietly told her that all was well. She looked up of him with her great eyes filled

with unshed tears and he bent over her Then he drew out the master key and put the ribbon over her head until the dull brass shone on her white

"You are once more the mistress of the muster key," be said gently, "and of my beart"

Something in her expression told him

he had said enough. With a cheerful word be went away. But the next day Sir Donald renewed his wooting in such a fashion that

Ruth was sorely put to it to keep him from demanding such caresses as her engagement made him rightfully ask for. The hardest part was that she perceived that John Dorr now knew that

she was to marry Sir Donald. He did not know, nor ever would, what that marriage was the price of. Everett, of course, had quietly introduced Sir Donald's assertion of his

ions and occurred in the omce. John had taken the blow steadily, but he was not one to walk in the

dark. He sought out Ruth and in a few words drew from her the truth. "Now we all know where we stand,"

John said bravely, smiling at her. "But I-1 thought you loved me too," she murmured.

"That doesn't alter the matter," be said comfortingly. "Now I must get to work. I've lots to do. Wilkerson has already started work around the spur, and I must begin driving intothe place where your father found that rich vein. We may drift into it any day."

Naturally enough the two camps kept pretty much to themselves, but Tom Kane carried the gossip to John Dort, evidently in an effort to distract his

The old cook knew that John's beart was breaking and between his love for each of them he was himself hard pressed to maintain a cheerful counte-

"Wilkerson's impatient as ever," be told John one afternoon. "He can't wait on tunneling and such, but he's going to blow the whole face of his hill right off. Told his men that dynamite was better than pick and shovet."

"Well," said John, "that may prove all right. At least he'll get a notion of what formation he has to deal with." Later that same day Kane announced that Wilkerson was going to set off

the higgest battery of shots ever tried in the valley. As a consequence Faversham, Ruth-John, Everett and many others went across the guich toward evening to

watch the show.

Old Tom Kane waggled his grey head doubtfully as he related how



the Hill Till Only Wilkerson Was

much dynamite had been planted and how Wilkerson's men were actually too nervous to work any longer. "He has to fix the fuses and fire the

shots himself," he said. True enough, they saw man after man come down the hill till only Wilkerson was left. Ruth noticed that be worked rapidly

and with an occasional glance down

a big rock shading her eyes against At last the work was apparently

Then the man straightened bimseif up as if master of the demons hiddenwoman watching him from below;

then he stooped.

An instant later there was a terrificexplosion, and a smoky gup appeared halfway up the hillside. At the foot of the slope lay the body Wilkerson, tossed there as onemight toss an old bat. The smoke on-

No one stirred. There were a dozen other unexploded shots in that hillside, any one of which would rikely bring the toppling crest downward. With white faces they held their Wilkerson's body twitched

slightly, the only moving thing in ther Then there was a wild scream, filled with terror, with passion, with flaming and awful desire, and Jean Darnell ran over the rubble toward the smoking bill, crying:

"Harry! Harry!" to Everett when they had left the of-A dozen men started to run to drag fice and turned toward the bungalow, her back, and a hundred voices mutteaving the other to go up to where tered warnings that held them in their tracks.

> self on it; then she rose and stared up at the great rocky crest. Did she hear the roar of voices calling to her to fee while there was time? Did she see the death that hung

Jean reached the body and flung ber-

above her. If she did she despised In this final cataciysm her wild heart broke through the bonds of this seifish existence and flung her a full passioned sacrifice on the body of the man who had loved her and given her his

all-honor and life! In the quick slience they who watched heard a single, full throated cry: "Harry! Harry!"

Then the mountain roared into the air, and the avalanche of rock poured over the two lovers in wave after wave till it had buried them forever. And as explosion after explosion

rocked the earth and filled the evening sky with furid debris Ruth struggled from Sir Donald's detaining grasp and fied into the arms of John Dorr, where she clung, sobbing:

"John! John!" Sir Donald looked at John Dorr's